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*The United States and the People's Republic of China: Are They Both a House of Cards Requiring Domestic Rejuvenation?*

Considering that the Persian Gulf was, in fact, a strategic defeat given what occurred in Iraq following the ceasefire, the U.S. hasn't "won" a war since World War II. Even so, U.S. citizens continue to support elected officials who knowingly pursue policies that do not best enable the U.S. to deter adversaries or win wars. Deterrence at its core seeks to affect the perceptions of an adversary and a strong military underpins U.S. strategic deterrence. Often overlooked when discussing strategic deterrence, however, are a strong economy and the political will to deter adversaries and wage war should deterrence fail. As the Chinese high-altitude balloon that recently passed over U.S. shores revealed, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is undoubtedly capable of threatening America's security. As such, it is critical that the U.S. effectively deter President Xi Jinping. As a part of its deterrence strategy, the U.S. must rejuvenate itself domestically understanding that it shares many of the same vulnerabilities as the PRC. If the U.S. is not honest, as it relates to understanding the PRC, understanding itself, and understanding the larger geopolitical environment, it risks seeing strategic competition with the PRC escalate to a war that the U.S. may not win and one that will undoubtedly serve as a catalyst to an economic disaster far worse than most Americans have encountered.

**Understanding the Adversary – Should the U.S. Look at Itself in the Mirror?**

President Xi Jinping's remarks about building a "Community of Common Destiny" are alarming given that he has created a surveillance state that has abolished individual freedoms, but the U.S. must come to terms with the fact that the PRC is much more like it than most citizens care to admit. In that vein, the U.S. must not forget its own history and the Manifest Destiny that advocated for peaceful expansion across the continent yet resulted in the death of an

estimated 100,000 Native Americans.<sup>1</sup> In another parallel, China's actions in the South and East China Seas aren't remarkably different, through a lens of aspirations and assertiveness, than the Monroe Doctrine that laid claim to the western hemisphere and was ultimately extended to justify President Theodore Roosevelt's gunboat diplomacy in the Caribbean. Additionally, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ideological fear of liberalism has driven its military spending over the preceding decades much like the U.S.' fear of communism drove spending during the Cold War. Even though China "does not want to be an honorary member of the West" the U.S. must recognize that an internal implosion within China itself, in part a product of ineffective state-directed investments, will prevent it from achieving its aspirations of a "Great Rejuvenation" after centuries of humiliation dating back to Genghis Khan.<sup>2</sup>

As a starting point, the U.S. must recognize that the regional and global expansionist desires of the CCP are all predicated on what it cares about most: its own survival. With this in mind, it becomes clear why Xi Jinping has monopolized control over China's economy, culture, media, and defense. Whether through constant information operations campaigns to control the Chinese, the establishment of an Orwellian police state that uses "speech and facial recognition to issue a social credit score" punishing citizens who dissent, human rights violations against the Uyghur population, or the repression of Tibetans, Xi Jinping recognizes internal stability is a prerequisite to the survival of the Communist Party.<sup>3</sup> Given an aging population without commensurate birthrates required to deliver economic growth, worsening food and water

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict With China* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2022), 18; Smithsonian American Art Museum, "The Trail of Tears," accessed 5 December 2022, <https://americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Manifest-Destiny-and-Indian-Removal.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Graham Allison, Robert D. Blackwill, and Ali Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020), 3

<sup>3</sup> Jahara Matisek and Buddhika Jayamaha, *Old & New Battlespaces: Society, Military Power, and War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2022), 146; Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict With China* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2022), 50.

scarcity, economic stagnation given its overextended industrial capacity manifesting itself in “factories sitting idle and goods rotting in warehouses,” and what many view as a pending financial bubble stemming from debt at 335% of its GDP,<sup>4</sup> there is a very real threat of domestic instability as its citizens struggle to maintain their socioeconomic status. As the Spartans’ strategies for fighting the Athenians in the Peloponnesian Wars were limited for fear of a Helot revolt at home, the CCP currently has the same threat within its provinces. While important to acknowledge some of the PRC’s fatal vulnerabilities, the U.S. must be willing to humble itself and recognize that prosperity and security are not guaranteed to exist in perpetuity because it faces some of the same vulnerabilities. If the U.S. is to deter the Chinese beyond 2027, when its strategic window for unification with Taiwan opens up, it must address these political, demographic, economic, and fiscal vulnerabilities.

### **Understanding Oneself – The Emperor Wearing No Clothes**

Irrespective of the fact that some of the world’s most profound thinkers would suggest that the greatest empires have embraced “people of other races, languages, religions, and cultures”,<sup>5</sup> the political divisiveness and extremism in the U.S. stoked by political officials appealing to certain factions of their base jeopardizes the U.S.’ experiment in democracy much like domestic instability in China threatens the CCP. As a case in point, survey data suggests 5% of Americans agree that the use of force, to include events where people are killed, is justified to

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<sup>4</sup> Nathaniel Taplin, “Chinese Overcapacity Returns to Haunt Global Industry,” *Wall Street Journal* (10 January 2019), cited in Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict With China* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2022), 43; Robert Spalding, *War Without Rules: China’s Playbook for Global Domination* (New York, New York: Sentinel, 2022), 205; Global Debt Monitor, Institute of International Finance (16 July 2020), cited in Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict With China* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2022), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Graham Allison, Robert D. Blackwill, and Ali Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020), 21.

restore Donald Trump to the presidency.<sup>6</sup> As concerning, violent sentiments and the use of force against the police in order to “stop police brutality against minorities” yields similar results.<sup>7</sup> Even though a similar divisiveness in the 19th century prompted Abraham Lincoln to suggest that demise would come from within, the U.S. still projects a sense of global supremacy and refuses to come to terms with a hubris analogous to the emperor wearing no clothes. In a country where 54% of its citizens have a literacy rate below 6th grade,<sup>8</sup> it is this hubris that blinds U.S. citizens from accepting the inevitable disintegration of their economy and society stemming from a population that viscerally pursues policies driven by emotion alone. With notions of a “great replacement” in which white Americans will become second-class citizens,<sup>9</sup> elected officials, such as Missouri Senator Eric Schmitt, have facilitated an erosion of America’s soft power in suggesting those with opposing political views are seeking to fundamentally change the country.<sup>10</sup> In espousing such claims, elected officials have in many respects sought to sow a divide in the country while shifting their constituent’s focus away from the country’s economic stagnation and the fact that U.S. companies still struggle to find employees in a labor pool that has grown slower than any since the Civil War.<sup>11</sup>

Similar to a rising debt relative to GDP and economic stagnation occurring in China, one must recognize the same negative trends exist in the U.S. The U.S. hasn’t seen its current level

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Morell, “U.S. Political Violence on the Rise: Professor Bob Pape,” *Intelligence Matters*, podcast audio, 19 October 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Alvin Parker, “Literacy Statistics in the US for 2023,” *prosperityforamerica.org*, 3 November 2022, accessed 24 December 2022, <https://www.prosperityforamerica.org/literacy-statistics/>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Morell, “U.S. Political Violence on the Rise: Professor Bob Pape,” *Intelligence Matters*, podcast audio, 19 October 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Steve Peoples, “Republican Senate candidates promote ‘replacement’ theory,” *pbs.org*, 17 May 2022, accessed 15 February 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/republican-senate-candidates-promote-replacement-theory>

<sup>11</sup> Bill Conerly, “The Scariest Chart for Business in the Coming Decade: Workers Not Available,” *forbes.com*, 25 March 2018, accessed 21 January 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/billconerly/2018/03/25/the-scariest-chart-for-business-in-the-coming-decade-workers-not-available/?sh=4158513c3de9>

of public debt to GDP ratio of 98% since WWII, the highest point in its history, and projections from the Government Accountability Office suggest that ratio will be 185% by the year 2052.<sup>12</sup> Given that public debt is that which is predominately held by foreign governments, as the ratio increases there will be slower economic growth and a greater risk for hyperinflation. A fiscal crisis becomes more probable as these foreign governments begin to question the U.S.' ability to pay back its debt and consequently don't buy Treasury securities to the degree required to fund U.S. spending. Considering this, the notion that the federal government should spend \$700 billion to enable everyone to attend college, through a policy such as College for All, reflects a workforce strategy that fails to account for the critical role of vocational education and professions in its economy.<sup>13</sup> It would be wise for U.S. politicians to consider that workforce development and training, rather than free college tuition, would bolster not only U.S. GDP but the supply chain resilience for U.S. industries. As both white and blue-collar workers are replaced by robots who are capable of providing cheaper labor alternatives, as seen with teachers, doctors, lawyers, and forklift operators to name a few, workforce development and training plays a critical role in getting individuals back to work. After all, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) currently assesses there to be 410,000 "discouraged workers" who believe jobs don't exist for them and this population will undoubtedly grow without opportunities for retraining.<sup>14</sup> Current employment data taken at face value, which many laud for an unemployment rate of 3.5% or roughly 5.7 million individuals, fails to reveal: the average duration for those unemployed is 22 weeks and an additional 5.2 million individuals the BLS

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<sup>12</sup> Molly Dahl et al., "The 2022 Long Term Budget Outlook," *Government Accountability Office*, July 2022, accessed 25 January 2023, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/58340>

<sup>13</sup> Melanie Hanson, "How Much Would Free College Cost?," *Education Data Initiative*, 13 November 2022, accessed 20 January 2023, <https://educationdata.org/how-much-would-free-college-cost>

<sup>14</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, "News Release: The Employment Situation – December 2022," *U.S. Department of Labor*, January 2023, accessed on 25 January 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empisit.pdf>

does not actually count as unemployed are those “not in the labor force who want a job” but haven’t looked for a job within the last month.<sup>15</sup> If the U.S. government seeks to avoid spending less than 20% of its total spending on welfare programs labeled income security programs,<sup>16</sup> as it had in 2021 and which often surpasses what the government spends on the contentious Defense Department budget, it must craft strategies, to include immigration reform, to get more net-positive contributors in the country.

In restricting immigration, administrations of both political parties have displayed little awareness of the factors that made the U.S. a great power and have let the irrationality of certain constituents influence immigration policy, much like China which, as a result of largely closing itself off to international talent, has seen a negative net migration rate year over year for the preceding decades.<sup>17</sup> Immigrants appear to be the only solution to provide the requisite number of workers across many U.S. industries, particularly in the agricultural and healthcare sector where 90% of paid senior care is done by immigrants.<sup>18</sup> American citizens must disassociate themselves with the notion that immigrants are exasperating fiscal deficits through their perceived strain on the nation’s welfare programs given evidence that suggests immigrants provide more in taxes than they receive in welfare benefits, in part a product of the fact that 72% of international immigrants are of working age.<sup>19</sup> In fact, even undocumented immigrants have played a significant role in maintaining the solvency of entitlement programs such as Medicare

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<sup>15</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, “News Release: The Employment Situation – December 2022,” *U.S. Department of Labor*, January 2023, accessed on 25 January 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empst.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> “10 Year Budget Projections – May 2022,” *Congressional Budget Office*, accessed 25 January 2023, <https://www.cbo.gov/data/budget-economic-data#3>

<sup>17</sup> Michael A. Dennis and Anand Toprani, “The Financial Foundations of U.S. Hegemony: Rethinking Modern Monetary Theory, Part 1,” *cimsec.org*, 14 October 2021, accessed 20 September 2022, <https://cimsec.org/the-financial-foundations-of-u-s-hegemony-rethinking-modern-monetary-theory-part-1/>; “Net Migration – China,” *The World Bank*, accessed 25 January 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.NETM?locations=CN>

<sup>18</sup> Mauro F. Guillen, *2030: How Today’s Biggest Trends Will Collide and Reshape the Future of Everything*, 53

<sup>19</sup> Mauro F. Guillen, *2030: How Today’s Biggest Trends Will Collide and Reshape the Future of Everything*, 32

and Social Security which would be depleted if not for their contributions.<sup>20</sup> As an example, while using fraudulent social security numbers these individuals still provide billions of dollars towards Social Security payroll taxes. Though these individuals cannot receive benefits in the future, because without a legal authorization to work their contributions are directed to the Social Security Administration's Earnings Suspense File, research suggests that positive cash flows of \$12 billion annually from these undocumented individuals will continue to benefit the financial status of the fund.<sup>21</sup> Blame is placed on immigrants for the perceived hardships of many U.S. citizens; however, immigrants have kept the trust funds solvent through their contributions. More importantly, "anti-immigration" rhetoric has enabled elected officials to avoid addressing the one thing that most jeopardizes the prosperity of America: reforming entitlement programs that consumed 70% of all government spending in 2021 and are projected to consume 85% of every tax dollar the government receives by 2050.<sup>22</sup>

As the U.S. spends more on entitlement spending and welfare programs, the ability of the government to look at tax revenue as part of the solution to reign in its debt looks bleak given that the U.S., like the PRC, is also suffering from declining birth rates and an aging population.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Leah Zallman et al., "Unauthorized Immigrants Prolong the Life of Medicare's Trust Fund," *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 18 June 2015, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4699990/>; Stephen Goss et al., "Effects of Unauthorized Immigration on the Actuarial Status of the Social Security Trust Funds," Social Security Administration, *Actuarial Note*, 151, April 2013, accessed 17 January 2023, [https://www.ssa.gov/oact/NOTES/pdf\\_notes/note151.pdf](https://www.ssa.gov/oact/NOTES/pdf_notes/note151.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Goss et al., "Effects of Unauthorized Immigration on the Actuarial Status of the Social Security Trust Funds," Social Security Administration, *Actuarial Note*, 151, April 2013, accessed 17 January 2023, [https://www.ssa.gov/oact/NOTES/pdf\\_notes/note151.pdf](https://www.ssa.gov/oact/NOTES/pdf_notes/note151.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Jeff Arkin et al., "The Nation's Fiscal Health: Federal Action Critical to Pivot Toward Fiscal Sustainability. Annual Report to Congress," *Government Accountability Office*, May 2022, accessed 22 January 2023, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-105376>

<sup>23</sup> Brady E. Hamilton et al., "Births: Provisional Data for 2020," *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*, May 2021, accessed 20 January 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr012-508.pdf>; Andrea Shalal, "Aging Population to Hit U.S. Economy Like a Ton of Bricks: U.S. Commerce Secretary," *reuters.com*, 12 July 2021, accessed 20 January 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/aging-population-hit-us-economy-like-ton-bricks-us-commerce-secretary-2021-07-12/>

Simply put, both nations are on trajectories where there are too few workers paying taxes to fund the government while increasing life expectancies require the government to allocate more money each year to care for the elderly. In a society that isn't civic-minded and in an ominous fiscal environment driven by the inability of the U.S. to sustain economic growth as a product of fewer individuals of working age, does the U.S. really think it could garner and sustain the political will to wage war? Many fall victim to the belief that nations are generally able to achieve their political objectives in war through a quick decisive victory even though only a few examples of such victories against another nation exist over the last 20 years with the most significant multi-domain conflict as the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in which Azerbaijan defeated Armenia in 44 days.<sup>24</sup> Given the fiscal and demographic outlook that lies ahead, and understanding the costs incurred to wage a protracted war, deterrence takes on an even greater significance requiring the U.S. to look at its foreign policy through a different lens.

### **Understanding the Environment – Life Beyond a Unipolar World**

The U.S. must not let the passion of strategic urgency override reason. In an age of re-globalization, an environment where the U.S. must account for the reality that it no longer lives in a unipolar world free to pursue a liberal hegemonic foreign policy, and a strategy that relies heavily upon balance of power coalitions and alliances, the U.S. must not forget the lessons of the Peloponnesian War. As the Athenians learned when Brasidas convinced allies to change their allegiance to Sparta,<sup>25</sup> alliances are not guaranteed as sovereign nations will pursue policies that serve their own interests.

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<sup>24</sup> John Antal, *Seven Seconds to Die: A Military Analysis of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the Future of Warfighting* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2022),vii.

<sup>25</sup> Josh Hammond "The Archidamian War", (lecture, Naval War College, Newport, RI, 18 August 2022).

In that vein, U.S. policymakers need to understand that its allies and/or coalition partners have their own interests beyond any shared values or noble objectives. The PRC, much like the U.S., seeks to influence prospective allies and partners in order to enhance their military and economic positioning. Even so, the PRC understands that 85% of the world's population reside in developing countries and these individuals are often more focused on their immediate living standards and not the idea of democracy as the U.S. would prefer. "Give me liberty or give me death", words spoken by Patrick Henry, embody the value Americans see in freedom;<sup>26</sup> however, the U.S. must consider that much of the world elects to prioritize a roof over their head and food on the table over their ability to elect a president. The PRC recognizes this and uses its story of the past 30 years to paint a picture that democratic governance is not a prerequisite to economic growth. In fact, the Chinese would point out that the World Bank assesses them to have less income inequality amongst their population relative to that of the U.S., with a GINI coefficient of 38.2 compared to 41.5 for the U.S.,<sup>27</sup> yet the political and economic rights between the two nations are vastly different. Even so, their pursuit of debt-trap diplomacy while "assisting" other countries and their desire to achieve the imperial status they had during the Ming Dynasty has many countries beginning to question "being treated as vassal states having to send tribute to China as they used to."<sup>28</sup> That being said, the U.S. can be an attractive option for states considering to bandwagon with the PRC if it refrains from conveying an ideological superiority in expecting the rest of the world to prioritize the adoption of its democratic values over their immediate needs of food, shelter, education, and healthcare. The U.S. must not forget that it

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<sup>26</sup> Dambisa Moyo, "Is China the New Idol for Emerging Economies," *TED Conferences*, TEDGlobal 2013, accessed 18 January 2023, [https://www.ted.com/talks/dambisa\\_moyo\\_is\\_china\\_the\\_new\\_idol\\_for\\_emerging\\_economies](https://www.ted.com/talks/dambisa_moyo_is_china_the_new_idol_for_emerging_economies)

<sup>27</sup> United Nations Statistics Division, "GINI Index (World Bank Estimate)," accessed 25 January 2023, [http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=WDI&f=Indicator\\_Code%3ASI.POV.GINI](http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=WDI&f=Indicator_Code%3ASI.POV.GINI)

<sup>28</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York, New York: First Mariner Books, 2017), 21; Graham Allison, Robert D. Blackwill, and Ali Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020), 4.

took 167 years from the signing of its constitution to the Supreme Court recognizing equal rights for all in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Political freedoms take time and the U.S. must respect the agency of its desired allies and partners even if their near-term priorities conflict with the desires of the U.S.

The U.S. doesn't have the resources to compete with the PRC without strengthening alliances and/or building "balance of power" coalitions; however, policymakers must not blind themselves to the reality that international audiences recognize U.S. interests aren't altruistic but rather driven by the reality that such a balance "decides who gets to write and enforce the rules"<sup>29</sup> that govern others. In recognizing that the ability to write and enforce international rules extends beyond state alliances, the U.S. has leveraged supranational organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, in its foreign policy since WWII. As an example, the U.S. contributed to the creation of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 to help preserve international peace. The notion, however, that the U.S. would be able to leverage the UN to organize a collective response, as it has historically done, is a fallacy given that both Russia and China have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The CCP has recognized that the United Nations, outside of the General Assembly or Security Council, affects its policy options and uses the Belt and Road Initiative to influence the leaders of recipient countries to "vote for whichever candidates the CCP supports" as was the case with the current director general of the World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>30</sup> Receiving no international condemnation or repercussions for blatantly failing to detect and promptly notify the WHO of SARS in 2002-2003 or of COVID-19, the significance of such

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<sup>29</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 16.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Spalding, *War Without Rules: China's Playbook for Global Domination* (New York, New York: Sentinel, 2022), 114.

appointments isn't lost on the CCP. Whether it be across the UN, through the World Bank which provides "significant development loans to China despite it being the world's second-biggest economy",<sup>31</sup> or in the World Trade Organization, the CCP has taken a page out of the U.S. book leveraging supranational politics to their benefit while also recognizing that great power politics between states plays a supporting role in their global expansionism.<sup>32</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The U.S. must display some strategic humility and recognize that its hyper-focus on hard power to deter the Chinese fails to address the domestic rejuvenation required to deter them beyond the next few years once their strategic window opens to move on Taiwan. Though the PRC likely has fatal vulnerabilities being masked by President Xi Jinping, the U.S. must recognize it has similar vulnerabilities. If elected officials continue to pursue policies that view the greatest threats as those coming from an opposing political party, immigrants, or authoritarian states such as the PRC, the U.S. will become complicit in its own demise. Additionally, as the era of strategic competition continues, Americans must humble themselves and recognize that international allies and partners may be less inclined to side with America if it continues to push a democratic form of governance on them while internally letting political bipartisanship tear at the fabric of the U.S. itself. The U.S. must allow itself to see the hypocrisy of its approach which also fails to recognize that prospective allies and partners may not be financially stable enough to support a legitimate form of democracy. The U.S. should take a page out of the PRC's book in buying time to rejuvenate itself domestically rather than risk a war

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Spalding, *War Without Rules: China's Playbook for Global Domination* (New York, New York: Sentinel, 2022), 153.

<sup>32</sup> Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing, China: People's Liberation Army, 1999), 156.

with the Chinese that would severely diminish the U.S.' ability to prosper over the coming century. After all, it is much more like the Chinese than many Americans care to admit.